

“I equate life with human dignity”

A conversation with Nobel laureate and political activist Wole Soyinka

The Nigerian writer Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka is the first African winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. He is considered to be Africa's most distinguished playwright. Born in 1934, he received education at the University College Ibadan (1952-1954) in Nigeria as well as at the University of Leeds in England. Among his most famous plays are *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Internationally acknowledged was also his autobiography *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981).

Soyinka has also played an important role in Nigeria's political history. In 1967, during the Nigerian Civil War, he was arrested by the Federal Government and put in solitary confinement for his attempts at brokering a peace between the warring parties.

I had the opportunity to talk to Wole Soyinka at the World Poetry Festival in Heidelberg in 2004.

By Naakow Grant-Hayford

G.-H.: Which piece of your work do you think people find most accessible?

I can tell you which one appears to be the most popular and the most accessible. That is “Aké, the years of childhood.” That seems to be the favourite one.

G.-H.: You once said that you were a secular humanist. What exactly do you mean by this?

“I intend to carry on writing as much as I can, and also to continue to act on behalf of human dignity and to raise my voice against injustice and oppression.”

Just straightforward, that I see my responsibilities as a human being and the focus as well as the context of my existence, as those of other human beings. I believe that religion is a very private matter and therefore, religion should not be the basis of governance. Ethics and morality should derive from the findings of the human entity, in his or her community. The experience of the world and ethics should come from history and should not be adopted as something of extraterrestrial origin, given from some deity of which there is no proof, but which some people passionately believe in. I believe that those who believe in the existence of an extraterrestrial authority should be left alone to worship in whatever form they feel adequate. But these intuitive derivations from that kind of faith should not be brought into secular governance of communities in the world.

G.-H.: According to an old saying, the only things that are truly worth living for are those that are worth dying for. Obviously religion has the power to produce such fatal fascination. People are ready to give their lives out of religious motives. It seems secular aims and concepts cannot induce such faithful adherence.

I wouldn't be too sure about that. I can show you that millions of people have died for a secular ideology. Communism in its time had many martyrs and self-

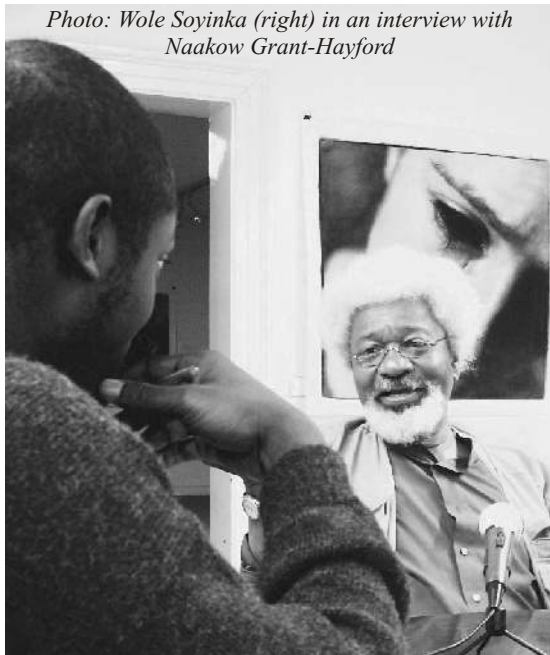


Photo: Wole Soyinka (right) in an interview with Naakow Grant-Hayford

Photo: Writer and political activist Wole Soyinka



sacrificing individuals. Many countries have gone through civil war on the basis of ideologies regarding, for example, the distribution of wealth. People have died or have been killed through contestation for basic human freedom. And there are people who will argue that it is even more worthwhile to die for the concept of freedom. Fascism has been resisted in the name of that unquantifiable virtue called freedom. People have fought fascism simply because they believed that it is better to die as a free human being than to exist as a second or third class citizen. Another example would be the history of resistance to slavery. In quite many instances, self-sacrificing slaves, who endured cruel deaths and punishment, were not fighting for religion. They were fighting for their dignity. So this other element is there. Secular ideology does offer this concept of self-worth which people have considered worth dying for throughout history. I personally wouldn't set out to die. But I'm willing to fight and to risk my life as I have done in defence of human freedom and dignity. Let's put it that way: I equate life with human dignity. Any struggle I have been involved in against dictatorship has its roots in the situation in which the human being is reduced as a sentient entity, subjected to the wounds, the caprices and the arbitrary disposition by another equal human being.

G.-H.: *How realistic is this emphasis on the relevance of equity and human dignity in political terms? Would you speak of yourself as an idealist or as a realist?*

Well, I'd say that I'm both. I am an idealist, but I

understand that in order to obtain the ideal, one has to be pragmatic. You don't go for an ideal on the wave of mere enthusiasm. You have got to be pragmatic. Let's look at it this way: There are some spiritual people who believe in an ideal realm, and who believe in it so passionately that they go into the wilderness, become anchorites, seek to be commune with nature, divorce themselves from mundane occupations and who meditate to get themselves into a state of pure essence. Now that's an extreme case of idealism. They have an ideal, or the intuitive conception of an ideal, and they try to purify their selves for the attainment of the ideal. If my ideal was a spiritual one, then I would behave like an anchorite, just detach myself and go and sit down somewhere.

But since I am involved in a real world, in which I have to deal with other human beings, in which I have to deal with filth, dirt, death and corruption among other things, I have no choice but to develop and utilise a strong pragmatic consciousness as a result of the collaboration of the two polarities realism and idealism.

G.-H.: *For over forty years, you have been fighting for democracy. When and why did it become your decided goal to fight for democracy? And how successful would you say have you been?*

Many people mystify democracy. It is possible to be a democrat without ever having heard the word *democracy* before. In some African societies, in the Yoruba world for instance, there are structures of checks and balances and accountability even within some monarchical systems, which grant the so called monarchy a titular status similar to the British example, in which the head of state has no powers at all but symbolic ones. So understanding and relishing and accepting the principles of democracy preceded my contact with this expression of the summation of the ideal goals of governance of society.

I grew up quite early watching and being part of a struggle to deal with a monarch - and I recount this in AKE - who forgot himself and who wanted to become a despot. He was winked out of his throne. My childhood was closely formed by events like that. Along with the debates about colonialism, the debates about our very existence and the very condition of our society under British rule, the

struggle against British colonialism certainly had great influence on my mind. So almost in a kind of osmotic way, one absorbed the principles of freedom, self-governance, rejection, and oppression, be it external or internal.

With regard to the overall success of my endeavours, well, if you want to call Nigeria a democracy right now, you could say that those of us who have been struggling for democracy have been successful. We've been resisting military rule for a long time and we finally got rid of it, but, as I have been stressing in my articles, in interviews and confrontations even with that regime, we haven't got a perfect democracy yet ...

G.-H.: But when is a democracy a perfect one? Isn't a stable, solid state a prerequisite for a functioning democracy?

You see, people define states differently. What is a nation-state? How do you define the Greek *demoi*, for instance? You can even talk about the pre-state existence of a community or of city-states. These for me are fascinating academic definitions, and generally definitions are at the disposal of ideological projections. Think about the African continent. What we have are artificial states. They were broken up and rebuilt to form stronger, more viable and more meaningful entities. But what we have remain artificial states imposed on the people at some time in history. So why do we claim them as states especially if they're costing us millions of lives? Why would the collapse of a state be such a bad thing? Why can't we envisage a larger entity in which we try to return to what were our nearest equivalents to nation-states? I ever wonder what the world would be without states...

G.-H.: Isn't that a somewhat subversive, dangerous thought?

Oh of course it's dangerous, but this thought is a pure theoretical gambit. I'm just questioning what we have right now and am asking what would be wrong with this theoretical proposition? I am not saying it should be followed, but after all, why should this purely theoretical prospect be any less valid?

G.-H.: With this theoretical question in the back of our minds, let me ask you a final, more concrete question: How close is the present situation in Nigeria to what we had in "Biafra" in the 60s?

I'm afraid we're very close. What is going on in

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Nigeria right now is fought with very great danger. And the danger is the following: If Nigeria as a state collapses, the risk is that it might not be peaceful, and that it may not happen in the context of a larger vision - for instance, in that of the African Union. It may not happen that way. You already have a fragmentation process going on. Regions and entire areas are virtually declaring their independence and insurgency is spreading all over the place. So I don't want to give too bleak a picture of what is going on, but one proof that the government is not unaware of this possibility is the fact that the president of the nation has learned to start talking - which is a good thing - to the leaders of some of these movements.

G.-H.: Does not the plurality of demands and interests constitute the real problem?

Yes. Unfortunately, it's not just in the oil region. In the north you also have those who want to install a theocratic system, which is one of the reasons why we have been calling for a national conference - a national conference assembling the peoples who make up the nation, the interest groups and the identifiable nation entities. Nigeria is, in a sense, a place of many nations, but if people felt they were part of a process, then a lot of the danger would be eliminated.

G.-H.: What do you think will be your greatest legacy?

I don't know about my legacy quite yet. I think legacies happen after one is dead, and all I know is that I intend to carry on writing as much as I can, and also to continue to act on behalf of human dignity and to raise my voice against injustice and oppression, primarily in my own country of course, but also wherever I happen to come across it. If I have managed to draw some of the younger generation into that kind of orbit, I'd say that is my legacy.

G.-H.: Mr Soyinka, thank you very much for this interview.

You're welcome.